



Pasatiempo

Mona Kuhn
humans being

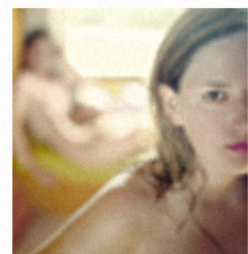
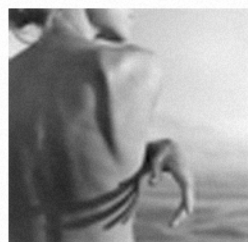


INSIDE TODAY



Mona Kuhn: Humans being

Nudes occupy many of Mona Kuhn's photographs because the San Francisco resident considers the unclothed human figure "a neutral form of human being." Her show at Photo-Eye Gallery opens with a reception today. **Pasatiempo, Inside.**



With her fluent command of German, Portuguese and English, Mona Kuhn can speak with many people around the world. But the Brazil-born Kuhn, now a San Francisco resident, has an even more universal tongue at her command: her sensitively conceived, carefully shot and impeccably printed photographs — both silver gelatin prints in black and white and chromogenic essays in subtle yet telling colors.

Those works feature the nude human figure, directly and sympathetically observed, singly and in groups. The settings are everyday, even prosaic — someone's backyard deck, a quiet room — but in their power and intent, the images suggest Eden before the fall: a conscious fairyland.

Kuhn's realm is limned in *Mona Kuhn Photographs*, opening with a reception from 5 to 7 p.m. today, June 25, at Photo-Eye Gallery; the show is named for the first major monograph on the artist's work, published by Steidl. Kuhn will be on hand to sign the book.

"The nude is basically — how do I say? — it's just a neutral form of human being," Kuhn said by phone from her Bay Area home. Her tone emphasized her idea of "being" as a state of existence, not a body's bone, muscle, fat and sinew. "It's away from fashion. It's away from time. It's a way for me to be timeless, to go to an essence of emotion." But emotion need not mean active sensuality: even in her multifigure works, where models are sitting or lying together, they project a sense of being but not acting; touching, but not in a sexual way.

Not that *model* is quite the right word. Unlike many photographers of the nude, who seek out perfect specimens of female form or male muscularity, Kuhn sees the person first, the form second. Most of her subjects are her friends. "What I look for in a model — it has a lot of components that come together in an organic way," she said. "It could be I meet them, and the friendship goes to a level where we feel comfortable with each other. Or someone might offer to be part of a photograph. Or I may see someone passing by — I get interested in them.

"At times, I favor androgynous features. I prefer to seek the human and natural in us, to develop images within a full range of emotions, abstract from muscled, gender-heavy renderings of the figure."

Complimented on her command of languages, the artist replied, "I was born in São Paulo, but my whole family is German. English is my third language. It can be confusing at times." Kuhn has been a U.S. resident since she was 19. She attended college at Ohio State University in Columbus, near where she has family, and studied international relations. She then moved to California, where she attended selected classes at the San Francisco Art Institute. She also now does independent studies at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, she said.

Essays and articles about her photographs have appeared in publications including *Photo Metro Magazine*, *B&W* magazine, *Camera Arts* and *Artweek*. Solo exhibitions have been held in galleries in New Orleans, San Francisco, Seattle, New York and Berlin. Elton John is among those who collect her work.

One of Kuhn's images was a portrait of several people sitting together. The picture's title — *Hoch-Zeit* — suggested a wedding, which Kuhn confirmed was true. "There are artists that are wonderful with titles," she said. "It's fantastic the way they suddenly give you lots of hints" about an image.

"To be honest with you, I'm just not like that. There are no layers and layers of nuances on my titles. They are mostly the names or nicknames of the people involved, or something that represents the memory of the photograph. *Hoch-Zeit* is an example of that, and yes, the person leaning over, in a somewhat pieta-like composition, proposed to her that day."

Kuhn works with simple tools. Her camera of choice is a "mid-'70s used Hasselblad; I bought a second body for it." She also has "two or three lenses, and black-and-white and color film magazines, and that's it," except for a 4 x 5 view camera for occasional use.

She does all her own darkroom work. For Kuhn, the photographer's eye is the darkroom's best tool. "It's the range of midtones in black-and-white," she said, explaining why her work is so meticulous and time-demanding. "With midtones, it's hard to hand it to someone else. The eye has to judge. It's such a nuance. Two percent difference can mean a lot." She does her own color printing as well. And she's not much interested in the digital revolution. "I'm not opposed to digital at all. If tomorrow there couldn't be any film, I'd do digital. But for me, it's easier to do film. I'm not restricted on batteries or chargers.

"I really try to focus on what it is I'm trying to say," she concluded. "I try to do it in a simple way, with black-and-white or color film, and get a simple thing with the composition. I like the silver gelatin print. I think it's lovely. Art should be done with the best thing you have, and I think the output should be the best."

In addition to the exhibit, Photo-Eye presents a lecture by Kuhn at 2 p.m. Sunday, June 27, at the Center for Contemporary Arts. ◀

details

- ▶ *Mona Kuhn Photographs*
Opening reception and book signing
5-7 p.m. today, June 25;
exhibit through Aug. 28
Photo-Eye Gallery, 370 Garcia St., 988-5159
- ▶ Lecture by photographer Mona Kuhn
2 p.m. Sunday, June 27
Center for Contemporary Arts,
1050 Old Pecos Trail
\$4, \$3 students; 982-1338